

That's English?! Reading Old Handwriting

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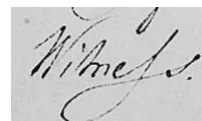
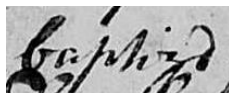
Old English Handwriting

Secretary hand was the most widely used writing from the about 1525 to the mid-1600s. In the mid-1600's, English 'round hand' or 'mixed hand' became the common style. This is very similar to the cursive we are familiar with. Abbreviations were often used, and some Latin was used. We will not discuss the Latin in this class, but if you go to the FamilySearch Research Wiki and search "Latin helps" you will find useful articles there.

Round or Mixed Hand

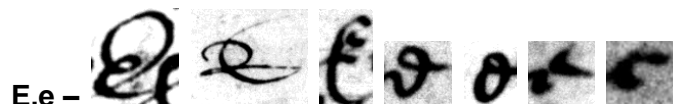
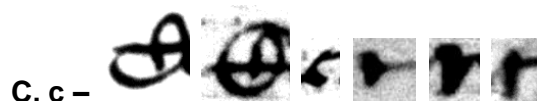
Starting with the more recent handwriting styles, a few of the notable differences in our modern hand are noted here:

- Open "p"
- Curved-back "d" like in "baptized"
- The "t" crossed more in the middle
- Double "s" in "Witness"

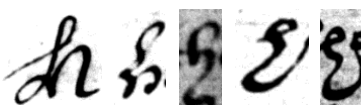


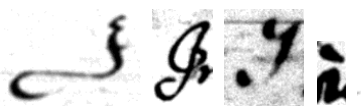

Secretary Hand

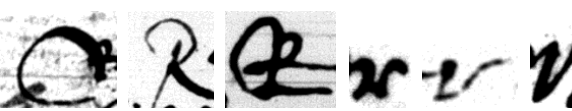

Secretary hand has even more letters that do not resemble more modern English styles. Some of the key ones are:¹


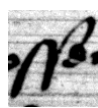



¹ All images taken from FamilySearch.org digital images.

H, h – 

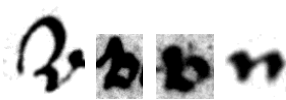
I, l –  double ii –  (I and J were often used interchangeably)

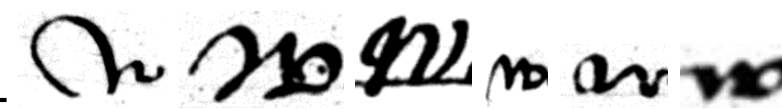
R, r –  final r – 


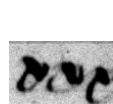
S, s –  double ss –  final s – 

T, t – 

U, u – 

V, v – 

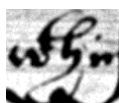
W, w – 

X, x –  three lower case xxx – 

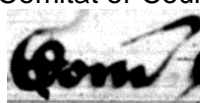
Abbreviations and Symbols

Just like we abbreviate and contract words today, the English did this. Just like the word “can’t” is an abbreviation of “cannot” and an apostrophe is used to indicate the contraction, symbols or marks were often used to indicate abbreviations in older English. Some of the more common abbreviations or marks are:

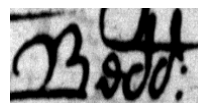
raised letter “th”



curl back as in “Com”
(Comitat or County)



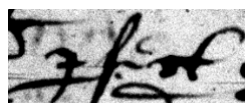
line on top



“&c.” (etc.)



‘per’ or ‘par’ as in “p[er]fect”



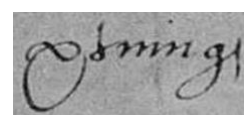
thorn



‘es’, ‘is’, ‘ys’ or ‘s’



X for Christ as in christenings



Tips and Tricks

No matter how well you can read the handwriting, there is always going to be some of it that is difficult. Here are some techniques that will help with any handwriting, including modern.

First, know what kinds of phrases that are in the document you are going to be reading. If you know what kind of document it is, then you will know what words, phrases, and patterns that it will have.

Look the document over for a few minutes and pick out letters, words, and phrases that you can read. Compare letters and words. Leave difficult words until after you have read the whole document.

Read for sense. And remember that spellings for words and names were not standardized until much later. If it sounds the same, it's probably the same. They could get creative with the spelling! Don't get hung up on the spelling, especially of names. There were so many people who could not read or write that they did not know how their own names were spelled.

Handwriting Helps

For more help, go to the FamilySearch Wiki (<http://wiki.familysearch.org>) and search for "Online Helps for Reading Old English Handwriting." Here you will find tutorials and examples of English handwriting.